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C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 000439

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL IZ SA

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR INPUT ON STRATEGY TO INTEGRATE IRAQ
INTO REGION

REF: A. SECSTATE 21447

B. BAGHDAD 630

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR LISA M. CARLE,
Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (c) This message provides answers to questions posed in ref a, soliciting input on strategy to integrate Iraq into the region. Input is keyed to topics listed in ref a para 5.

¶2. KEY POINTS:

-- (C) While the Saudis have been reluctant to engage with the Al-Maliki government, their views are evolving as the political/security situation stabilizes.

-- (C) Saudi reluctance to engage can be ultimately overcome by addressing their key concerns, i.e., demonstrating that: Sunni factions are successfully being integrated into the domestic political process; the Al-Maliki government is acting independently of Iran; and the security situation has improved sufficiently to allow a Saudi envoy to function without undue fear of being targeted by terrorists.

-- (C) The Saudis are supportive of the neighbors' process, which they see as a vehicle that can also isolate Iran.

¶3. (C) CURRENT STATUS OF RELATIONS WITH IRAQ: Saudi Arabia continues to drag its feet on engagement with the Al-Maliki government, forgiving Iraqi debts, and sending an ambassador to Baghdad. The SAG seeks to maintain Iraq's unity, its Arab identity, and its sovereignty. It wants an independent Iraq free of Iranian influence. Key Saudi priorities include continuing the integration of "all Iraqis" (i.e., Sunnis) into the new political system, and bilateral cooperation on security and counter-terrorism issues.

¶4. (C) OBSTACLES TO IMPROVING RELATIONS: Like other Arab states, the SAG is deeply concerned about Iran's influence in Iraq's internal affairs and on the disenfranchisement of Iraqi Sunnis. Both the King and Foreign Minister have publicly stated their belief that the US invasion of Iraq resulted in a shift of the regional balance of power in Iran's favor. The King and other key officials deeply mistrust Al-Maliki, whom they view as having facilitated the expansion of Iranian influence in the region. In addition, the Saudi relationship with the Maliki government has been strained, say MFA officials, because he presented a blue print for integration of the Sunni factions into the government and then didn't live up to it.

¶5. (C) A senior MFA official observed that the recent elections appear to have strengthened Al-Maliki, improving his ability to govern, and implying that a continuation of this trend would improve Saudi willingness to broaden its engagement. The same official told a Canadian colleague that the SAG was "pleased" by the outcome of the Iraqi elections. Most particularly they were happy to see the ISCI lose influence. As a result the SAG had decided to "review its options" with respect to Iraq with a view to containing

Iranian influence. This would apparently include consideration of reconstruction assistance. Despite this, the SAG is still not/not prepared to set a date to send an Ambassador.

¶6. (C) EXISTING INITIATIVES: Asked about Saudi willingness to participate in regional initiatives, MFA Director of Western Affairs Ra'ed Grimly did not answer directly. Instead, he observed that the "Neighbors Process" was launched to underscore the concept of non-interference in Iraqi affairs. Iran, he asserted, has not yet "grasped" this concept. Syrian behavior, however, is much improved. The current Saudi efforts to achieve a reconciliation on the Saudi/Egyptian/Syrian/Jordanian front would improve regional integration of Iraq. In a conversation with the Ambassador, Saud Al-Faisal suggested that the Neighbors Process would be a useful vehicle for isolating the Iranians, so long as the others were united. We understand from our French colleagues that this subject was discussed during Turkish President Gul's recent visit to the Kingdom, with the Saudis pressing the Turks to play a stronger regional coordination role.

¶7. (C) OPENNESS TO PARTICIPATING IN NEW FORUMS: Limited. Saudis see themselves as already playing a major role in existing forums. Given their limited institutional capacity for sustained engagement in any initiatives, and their likely skepticism regarding the utility of any additional mechanisms, they are not likely to be enthusiastic about new forums.

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